







# The first of many

Ian Morton celebrates the remarkable Fanny Rollo Wilkinson, the first woman in the country to become a professional landscape gardener

**I**N June last year, on the wall of 239–241, Shaftesbury Avenue, W1, a new English Heritage blue plaque joined more than 950 circular memorials found across the capital. Unveiled by *Gardeners' World* presenter Rachel de Thame, it reads: 'Fanny Wilkinson, Landscape gardener and designer of many open spaces in London, lived and worked here 1885–1896.' The building overlooks one such open space, a triangle laid out to Wilkinson's design more than 130 years ago after she recommended that, 'if some trees were planted, or seats placed on it, it would be a great boon to this crowded neighbourhood'.

The plaque was not only long overdue, but it woefully understates Wilkinson's feminist impact on the late-Victorian scene and beyond. Mrs de Thame described her as 'a horticultural pioneer who blazed a trail for those women who work as head gardeners, garden designers and landscapers at the highest level'. English Heritage historian Rebecca Preston said that she deserves to be better known as 'a promoter of women's horticultural education and an advocate of women's rights'.

Educated privately and abroad, Wilkinson's enthusiasm for gardening was kindled after her father, an eminent Manchester doctor and president of the British Medical Association, inherited as a family home Middlethorpe Hall, an imposing William and Mary building set in 20 acres just south of York. She spent four childhood years there and the lawns, ponds and borders provided her with an inspiration that would direct her entire life. 'I was always fond of gardening as a child, and I took it up because I felt it suited me and I wanted to do something,' she declared in an interview. 'I began to devote myself

to gardening in a practical way.' Last year, two days after the London plaque ceremony, another plaque was unveiled at Middlethorpe Hall by Suzie Mercer, the Sheriff of York. Installed by York Civic Trust it reads: 'Fanny Rollo Wilkinson, 1855–1951, Britain's first professional woman landscape gardener lived, and was inspired to garden, here.'

Wilkinson's first objective was to penetrate the male-dominated gardening arena at a serious level. This proved a test of her perseverance and it took several attempts before she was admitted to the Crystal Palace School of Landscape Gardening and Practical Horticulture

to take a course designed for men seeking a defined career. The 18-month course was certainly not for well-off middle-class ladies, who were expected only to appreciate the tidy appearance and floral yields of well-ordered borders and grounds. In 1883, she emerged from the course as a qualified and resolute 28 year old and, within

a year, was appointed honorary landscape gardener to the newly founded Metropolitan Public Gardens Association (MPGA), the country's leading gardening charity.

The MPGA exists to this day and, indeed, nominated Wilkinson for her blue plaque. Further evidence of her determination came two years after her appointment, when she persuaded the association to accept her as an employee on a salary comparable to that of a man. 'I certainly do not let myself be underpaid as many women do,' she declared in an 1890 interview in the *Women's Penny Paper*. 'I know my profession and charge accordingly, as all women should do.' Further, she admitted that being in charge of a team of male gardeners was not always easy 'as they occasionally imagine they know better, and they are often stupid and pig-headed'.

Over two decades, Wilkinson designed and supervised the layout and planting →



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**Fanny Wilkinson is lauded (above) for a host of gardens, such as Myatt's Fields Park (left)**





Paddington Street Gardens (above) is among 75 public spaces and churchyards in the capital transformed by Wilkinson (below)

of no fewer than 75 public spaces and disused churchyards across the capital, among them Wilmington Square and Northampton Square in Clerkenwell, Red Lion Square in Camden, Myatt's Fields Park in Camberwell, Goldsmith's Square in Hackney, Paddington Street Gardens, and the churchyards of St John's Smith Square, St Anne's Limehouse, St Luke's Chelsea, St Mary's Bow and St George's Bloomsbury.

One of her largest and most remarkable undertakings, and further evidence of her resolve, was the creation of the then 86-acre Meath Gardens in Tower Hamlets, formerly the commercial and unconsecrated Victoria Park Cemetery, where some 300,000 were interred over 34 years after London's church graveyards could take no more. Under Wilkinson's direction, 30 men spent a year restoring the compacted surface to workable condition and the new gardens were named after Lord Brabazon, Earl of Meath, founder of the MPGA.

After her blue-plaque unveiling, during a commemorative tour of Meath Gardens, her great-great-niece Jeanie Northover remarked on 'the wretchedness of the living conditions while the cemetery was still in use and the extremely macabre job my great-great-aunt had in turning the cemetery into a healthy space'. The gardens became an essential amenity for East-enders and, today, attract nine million visitors a year. None know what lies beneath.



Wilkinson's circle of friends was socially influential. She was an early associate of the Central Committee of Women's Suffrage, which was led by her relative by marriage Millicent Fawcett, and she became landscape designer to the philanthropic Kyrle Society founded in 1876 by social reformer Miranda Hill 'to bring beauty home to the people'. The society treasurer, Miranda's sister Octavia, went on to co-found the National Trust. On behalf of the society, Wilkinson designed Vauxhall Park on the site of the old Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens

and the 8½ acres retain some of her original paths bordered by groups of trees, shrubs and plants, a playground and fountain. Its completion all but emptied the Kyrle coffers, but the park gained instant status when it was opened in 1890 by the Prince of Wales. Under the aegis of Lambeth borough, it is today maintained by the Friends of Vauxhall Park and is highly valued as a social hub. Its lavender garden, established in 2003 to mark the centenary of the motor company whose original factory was nearby, provides an annual lavender harvest.

In 1899, Wilkinson helped to found the organisation that would become the Women's Farm and Garden Union, through which the government encouraged women to work on farms during the Second World War and that subsequently became the Women's Land Army. Her professional progress, meanwhile, took her to Swanley Horticultural College as its first female principal. As the first women's-only establishment for scientific garden training, its graduates included influential garden designer Madeleine Agar, as well as Annie Gulvin and Alice Hutchin, the first female staff to be appointed at Kew Gardens.

Wilkinson left Swanley in 1922, but maintained her links with the Land Army and Bloomsbury. She spent her final years in Leiston in Suffolk breeding goats and—of course—gardening. She died in 1951, aged 95. 🐌